



Educating Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children with Multiple Challenges

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Key Facts

- Teachers of the deaf are graduating from programs with strong skills sets that prepare them to be exceptional teachers of typically developing students with hearing loss.
- Teachers report that their training and experience do not provide them with the background necessary to address the demands of teaching deaf and hard of hearing students with additional challenges.
- The complexity of deaf learners has increased dramatically in the last two decades yet the training to successfully prepare teachers to teach these children has not.
- Teachers are often in search of ways to gain a better understanding of what makes these learners unique and how to help them reach their true potential.
- It has been reported that 20-40% of deaf students have additional needs including (but not limited to):
 - Learning disability
 - Neurological disability
 - Visual impairment
 - Physical disability
 - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
 - Emotional disturbance
 - Autism
 - Intellectual disability

Teachers of the deaf are clearly in search of opportunities to learn more about these special children and to gain insight into how to best provide them with an education that meets their needs. The challenge is that the small numbers of deaf youngsters with multiple “educationally significant” disabilities in the general population makes it extremely difficult to develop research-based practices for teaching them. However, it is possible to become familiar with the challenges these children face and learn to adapt many of the techniques and strategies that are found to be successful with their hearing counterparts who have similar struggles.

It is important for teachers to become familiar with common traits of deaf students with additional challenges. For many of these students, patterns of problematic presentations are observed such as:

- Cognitive inflexibility
- Inattention
- Inability to take another’s perspective (Theory of Mind)
- Restricted areas of interest
- Self-stimulating behaviours
- Expressive/receptive language impairments not related to hearing loss
- Social difficulties
- Self-regulation limitations

When children present with disruptive and atypical behaviours secondary to these issues, teachers often begin to see the challenge through a deficit lens and ask questions such as:

- Why can’t he sit still?
- Why can’t she keep up?

- Why can't he follow instructions?

What is critical in becoming successful teachers of these students is to consider a paradigm shift, which is centered on asking better questions. Teachers who successfully meet the needs of these students are those who transform "He can't" statements into "He could...if" statements. These teachers also consider the possibility that noncompliant behaviour may actually be due to skill deficits (and not mere noncompliance). With these shifts in thinking comes a much broader range of possibilities for success.

For students with obvious physical limitations, it is clear that making accommodations to address these challenges is imperative to ensure full access to learning. No one would suggest that a blind child not take part in a classroom activity because they can't see nor would they suggest that a child in a wheelchair be excluded from an activity because they can't engage in the same way as classmates. In fact, neither of these conditions would even be considered "limitations" but rather opportunities to teach these students the skills they need to manage their vision and physical needs in addition to providing them with appropriate accommodations. However, when "limitations" are invisible, the child is often perceived to be more responsible for changing their behaviour than adults are for providing the support necessary for them to gain full access to the curriculum. It is not as easy to consider that a "stubborn" child may, in fact, be anxious. In such a case, dealing with the anxiety and teaching coping strategies may allow the child to be less rigid and better able to take part in classroom activities. If the child who tantrums during transitions is seen as a child who struggles with cognitive inflexibility, then strategies may be put in place (ex. visual schedules) to help him predict and cope with the change in routine and in doing so, enable him to quickly re-engage.

Once teachers have become skilled at understanding the underlying causes of many of the behaviours observed (remembering that "behaviour is communication"), they are better able to meet the student's needs by making changes in the environment and/or helping the child develop the skills needed to successfully cope with stressors.

When the behaviours persist, teachers who have a basic understanding of behaviour analysis find themselves with even more skills in their "tool box." With that knowledge, they can begin by assessing the function (i.e. the reason the behaviour is occurring) rather than the form (i.e. the behaviour itself). A plethora of research has shown that behavioural interventions that address the function of behaviour rather than its form are more successful. When considering the reasons underlying behaviour, a well-designed ABC (Antecedent – Behaviour – Consequence) analysis will provide teachers with a wealth of information. Determining the events that set the stage for the behaviour to occur (antecedents) as well as what happens as a result of the behaviours (consequences) can lead to the ability to neutralize the antecedents and make the consequences ineffective. In many cases, teaching the student adaptive, appropriate replacement behaviours is the key to success. For example, teaching students to use functional communication strategies will enable them to verbalize their wants and needs rather than acting out to get desired outcomes and in the process, help them expand their communicative abilities that can be applied in a variety of settings.

Once teachers have developed a greater understanding of the source of the behaviours, observed and utilize strategies intended to meet the needs of their students, the greater likelihood that time on task will be increased and with that, greater academic progress within reasonable expectations. As strategies become part of their repertoire, teachers become more confident and spend less time "trying to figure it out" and more time enjoying their students. Teachers need to be aware that most students with complicated learning profiles will experience times when old behaviours may resurface. This should not be a time for panic or discouragement but rather an opportunity to ask better questions, step back and assess the big picture, and do what they now know is best. Respect for a student's struggle and faith in their ability to "do better when they know better" will likely end in good outcomes for everyone.

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Education Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children with Multiple Challenges Resource Guide

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